

**RI Department of Health
Public Information Policy
Prohibition Against the Release of Confidential Health Care Information
Guidelines for Public Information Regarding Reportable Incidents**

Policy:

In compliance with federal law and section 5-37.3-1 et seq of the Rhode Island General Laws, the Rhode Island Department of Health provides only the following information about an individual (or individuals) involved in a reportable disease incident:

- Age: “child”(0-11), “teen” (12-17), “adult” (18-64), “senior adult” (65+)
- Gender:
- City or town of residence (if 20,000 pop or greater) See below*
- Disease or Condition:
- Status: “recovered or well,” “under active medical treatment,” (home, outpatient, hospital), “deceased”

Less information can be released if there is a reasonable expectation that knowledge of these characteristics will lead to the identification of the individual involved. The Department of Health will not confirm the identity of any patient.

Rationale:

The Rhode Island Department of Health (HEALTH) observes a legal and ethical requirement to protect the confidentiality of individual health care information. According to RI statute, HEALTH may not reveal “confidential health care information which explicitly or by implication identifies a particular patient”. (RIGL 5-37.3-3). The diagnosis of a reportable disease or condition is confidential health care information.

The law also directs HEALTH to “publish and circulate, from time to time, information that the director may deem to be important and useful for diffusion among the people of the state.” (RIGL 23-1-1) Typically, such information includes aggregate numbers, rates, trends and other statistics that cannot be connected with individuals.

In extraordinary circumstances HEALTH may determine that public notification of single, reportable incidents is essential to the public’s health. Such notifications may include the occurrence of infectious diseases and/or conditions involving abuse or safety along with the steps that the public can take to avoid disease/injury and promote health. The sole criterion for this action is to provide contextual information that in the judgment of the Director of Health is necessary to prevent misinformation or rumor—especially during times of high public anxiety and intense media interest.

This information must be released in such a way as to assure that the identity of the patient will not be revealed.

City or Town of Residence: Following the confidentiality guidance of the US Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), health care information about individuals will be characterized by city or town of residence for individual local jurisdictions or groupings having at least 20,000 population (US Census, 2000) according to the following format.

Individual towns (>20,000)	Town Groups (>20,000)
Bristol	Barrington/Warren
Coventry	East Greenwich/West Greenwich
Warwick	Portsmouth/Middletown
West Warwick	Tiverton/Little Compton
Newport	Foster/Gloucester/Scituate
Cranston	Burrillville/North Smithfield
Cumberland	Pawtucket/Central Falls
East Providence	Charlestown, Richmond, Hopkington/Exeter
Johnston	Jamestown/Narragansett/New Shoreham
Lincoln	
North Providence	
Providence	
Smithfield	
Woonsocket	
North Kingstown	
South Kingstown	
Westerly	
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